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Censurable Intelligence Agency

The CIA has much high-tech equipment, like a camera with a lens that can read a Moscow license plate from 10 miles up. How come, then, did it miss the fact that Bill Clinton was elected president on Nov. 3, 1992?

Come to think of it, the CIA often misses the big ones. Remember the Soviet Union? The agency fed us so much bum dope about the size and strength of its economy that we spent ourselves silly on weapons we'll never use. More recently the CIA got it wrong about the size and strength of the forces our Rangers were up against in Mogadishu.

Everyone knows why the CIA was created. In a major lapse, Harry Truman, feeling the pressure of the Iron Curtain, decided on an agency that could go up against the KGB on its own terms. The CIA was allowed to operate without the usual constraints of law and common sense. It experimented on human beings, tried to rub out foreign leaders, waged wars, lied, cheated and stole just like the competition. It was George Bush's favorite government agency. To him, it was a dream come true: a federally subsidized Skull and Bones.

The question is why the CIA still exists. Perhaps it does not have any sophisticated equipment that would help its people discover that the Cold War is over. Of course, if they believed their own so-called intelligence, which told them that the Soviets were rich and getting richer, they may think that Soviet tanks are still poised to roll over Germany and that we should close yet another school and library to save money for more satellites. Congress has not told them the truth. Last year, it increased the agency's appropriation, which, is, of course, a secret to us taxpayers.

Congress is part of the problem. Members love to "go upstairs" to the super-secure room where they get briefings that make their blood run cold. Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan (D-N.Y.) has sensibly suggested that the "company" should be "eliminated with extreme prejudice," to borrow one of its garish phrases. He has no cosponsors for his bill.

Congress, which secretly shares Bush's fondness for cloak and dagger, cannot imagine life without the CIA. They like the excitement, the feeling of knowing what nobody else can know, voting appropriations behind locked doors. They tell themselves that the country absolutely has to have "objective intelligence."

But once again, CIA employees are dishing up dirt that shows they see themselves not as information collectors, but policymakers. They, with their partiality to dictators, are on the side of Lt. Gen. Raoul Cedras, the bully who broke his word on Haiti and stood by while the minister of justice was gunned down. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the priest who was elected by 67 percent of Haiti's voters, and who is a populist, a liberation theologian, an enemy of the military, is pure poison to them.

Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.), a man after their own hearts, sent for the CIA's famous profile of Father Aristide and the agency's most notorious briefer, Brian Latell, who is described in Bob Woodward's book, "Veil." Latell was a favorite of the late director William Casey because he is an analyst, he was a "high diver." A famous analysis: Circa 1982, he predicted revolution in Mexico.

Latell told the Senate intelligence committee that the president we proposed to return to Haiti this weekend is a "psychopath." The CIA clearly agrees with Republicans who say Clinton should not vouch for this so-called flake. Why have a president when the spooks are willing to do foreign policy?

Clinton's reaction was disappointing. He hasn't said much, and he hasn't fired anyone. But he hates confrontation, and would rather talk about health care. It's nice to have a president who isn't touchy about insubordination. Who would bring back Nixon or Johnson, who bombed small countries when crossed?

But it comes to a question of leadership. If you were a trembling member of the Haitian parliament and your life depended on Clinton's firmness, you might lose heart to see members of his own administration bait him with impunity. He took many uppercuts during the gay debate from people who were supposedly working for him in the Pentagon. This is more serious. Whether CIA people like it or not, he's boss. Someone should tell them about the democratic way and break it to them that Aristide swept the first fair election in Haiti's history.

The only appropriate response to the calumnious briefing came from Rep. Joseph P. Kennedy II (D-Mass.), who engaged in the powerful non-verbal communication that Clinton used to be good at. He invited Aristide to his wedding, generating pictures of the outcast in the bosom of the Kennedy family.